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WHEREIN DIRECT HOUSING LEGISLATION FAILS

BY EDWARD T. HARTMAN,

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Direct housing legislation is useful and always will be as a means of voicing public opinion and setting standards below which one may not go under any circumstances. The careless and the pernicious have most always to be reached in this way. But housing legislation deals with a result. Bad housing, while it causes many difficulties, is itself essentially a result. To solve it we must reach the causes. The tendencies in home construction and maintenance are the result; the causes are various.

Housing legislation fails to regulate taxation and therefore largely fails to solve the housing problem. Housing legislation increases the cost of homes; increases the tax on homes; increases rents; forces people into poorer homes; makes home ownership more difficult; delays marriage; retards the development of the home and parental instincts; tends to the perversion of these instincts. Housing legislation does not regulate taxation, for we tax homes. When a man builds a home we put a penalty on him. Housing legislation does not recognize the unearned increment, therefore it penalizes the man who helps to build up the community and favors the man who maintains vacant lots, and develops weed patches and dump heaps.

The tax on homes increases because housing legislation does not bring us to conduct the enterprises which help to keep down taxes. We run all non-profitable enterprises in large part by taxing improved lots, industries and homes and turn over to private groups all profitable enterprises.

Housing legislation fails to show us that one lot is as valuable to the community as the lot next to it, so we tax the improved lot higher than the vacant lot, and tax the improvements in addition.

Housing legislation fails to regulate the planning and the development of a city. Tom, Dick and Harry put streets of the kind they please, where they please; and the taxes on improved lots, industries and homes have to pay for making the streets usable and for getting sewers into them.

Housing laws do not control the number of houses to the acre, as does the English town-planning act of 1909, except in a very general way. Exercise of this power would prevent congestion on the land and put a very effective stop to land speculation, because land with a restricted use will not attract speculators like unrestricted land. This restriction would enable people to live under better conditions in respect to both cost and sanitary conditions. Direct housing laws do not reach this problem.

Housing laws do not regulate the improvement of old streets. It often happens that control of an area is secured, a law is passed providing for the widening of a narrow street through it, the improved lots and homes are taxed to pay a large price for the land and property taken and for making a new street. The value of the property in the neighborhood is enormously increased. Housing laws fail to give this increase to those who paid for making it possible. This unjust imposition on people not benefited is a favorite method of city building in many places.

Housing laws fail to regulate monopoly, so improved lots and homes pay the taxes which ought to be paid by monopoly. Monopoly has this advantage over homes reached by housing laws and it also has the power to increase the other costs of living so that people have to move into poorer homes and home ownership becomes more difficult, family life is held back, good instincts are perverted and bad instincts gain a foothold.

Housing laws do not control transportation, so people have difficulty in getting out to light, ventilation, and a helpful environment. The city can thus not grow as it ought and improved lots are more used, houses are more crowded, sickness, immorality and poverty are increased and improved lots and homes have to be taxed more to take care of the results.

Housing laws fail to promote home ownership. To develop a community of citizens home ownership is desirable. The cities of Germany recognize this. Ulm, for example, is embarked on a campaign to become a city of citizens owning homes. The city is building the homes. It will build homes for all who can pay down 10 per cent of the cost and it intends to build homes for all who will begin to save the 10 per cent required.

Housing laws in America fail because they do not distinguish between citizen building and fortune building. They fail to show our

city, state and national governments that the welfare of all the people is more important than the welfare of a few at the expense of all the remainder.

Housing laws fail to affect wages. They increase efficiency, but this increase goes more to the employer than to the employee. The laws increase the cost of houses but only remotely affect wages so as to make people able to occupy houses at increased rentals. Hence people are kept out of good homes and forced into bad homes.

Housing laws fail to affect the honesty of labor. Labor is to a large extent given to doing as little as possible for a day's work. The cost of a day's work goes into the cost of homes and of living. An honest day's work helps to reduce the cost of homes and of living.

Housing laws fail to affect public opinion. All we do depends on public opinion. In Europe cities are run by bodies of men picked for their ability to run cities properly. They keep land values down largely by restraining land speculation and by public ownership of large areas of land. They keep down taxes on homes by taxing land and by running paying enterprises as well as losing enterprises. We will have to content ourselves with less personal freedom, which is too commonly mere license for the few. Freedom of action for the few comes to us at the expense of "thralldom and repression for the many."

Housing laws fail because they do not reach the constitutions. Written constitutions ought to be amended frequently, for the world changes. When our constitutions were written they were fixed and changes were made difficult, almost impossible. Our housing laws encounter this difficulty and we have adopted means of getting around it only to a very slight extent. A real constitution is the voice of the living present, not of the dead past, except as the past gives us experience.

It is a mere truism that the people make the community, yet many people, among them many who call themselves housing reformers, think that business and houses make the community. Business and homes are essential, but only as servants of the people. Housing laws, now about all that any housing organization has recognized, fail to make good homes obtainable homes. They will continue to fail till they are worked out jointly with the other problems mentioned.

Housing laws fail in all these things in America because America

treats them as a detached proposition, which they are not. Housing laws in America are not, however, a total failure. When they are developed they help people to see other things needed and when these are once fully observed the necessary things will be supplied and housing laws will be interwoven with all the other needed regulations to the end that people may live and grow strong. The people are the community and the community, business and all, go up as its human element goes up, down as its human element goes down.